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Market-driving strategy and personnel attributes: Top management versus middle management[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role that personnel attributes play during the implementation of a market-driving strategy, a topic that has heretofore received limited academic attention. Contrary to the traditional reactive market-driven approach, the proactive market-driving approach pertains to influencing the market structure and/or the market players' behavior in a direction that enhances the firm's competitive posture. Using a qualitative research design, it is empirically demonstrated for the first time that specific characteristics of the top management (i.e., open-minded policy, strong vision, strategic human resource management, transformational leadership, prediction skills and insightfulness, fostering creativity), as well as certain traits of middle-level employees (i.e., open-minded policy, transformational leadership, creativity, expertise, intrapreneurship, commitment, flexibility) are of central importance to the market-driving concept. Relevant research propositions are formulated and their respective implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Customer centricity has been a core concept in marketing for several decades. In fact, nowadays, customer centricity has become a basic prerequisite for every firm aspiring to obtain a paramount competitive edge in any market (Shah, Rust, Parasuraman, Staelin, & Day, 2006). In an effort to enrich this concept, theories have been developed, such as those of market orientation (i.e., information generation, information dissemination, and responsiveness) (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990) and market-driven organizations (i.e., firms who sense and act on trends in their markets, without attempting to alter market conditions) (Day, 1994). Such theories have further clarified the importance of being oriented not only toward the customer (Angulo-Ruiz, Donthu, Prior, & Rialp, 2014), but also toward other stakeholders (Carrillat, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2004).

However, more recently, scholars have begun criticizing the classic market-orientation conceptualization as being excessively responsive toward market conditions and as over-emphasizing current customer needs, thereby neglecting latent ones (Chen, Li, & Evans, 2012; Hills & Sarin, 2003). Furthermore, the classic definition of market orientation fails to clarify the strategic moves of market players who behave

proactively, shape the “status quo” of their industries, and change the so-called “rules of the game.” Additionally, within any given market, if all market players were to adopt a responsive market-driven philosophy, no firm would eventually obtain a competitive advantage (Neuenburg, 2010). Indeed, the foregoing arguments indicate that, despite its unquestionable impact (e.g., Foltean & Feder, 2009; Najafi-Tavani, Sharifi, & Najafi-Tavani, 2016; Raju, Lonial, & Crum, 2011; Zhou, Brown, & Dev, 2009), the classic approach toward market orientation is conceptually incomplete. Such a shortcoming has been tackled through the development of the market-driving strategy concept, defined as an influence over the structure of the market and/or the behavior(s) of market players in a direction that enhances the competitive position of the business (Jaworski, Kohli, & Sahay, 2000).

To date, market orientation has received noteworthy scholarly attention (Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005). However, most of the research conducted so far has unilaterally concentrated on market-driven strategy. Furthermore, this research has left important gaps concerning the clarification of important practical issues, such as the identification of certain antecedents to this strategy (Ghauri, Wang, Elg, & Rosendo-Ríos, 2016). More specifically, little is known about the role that personnel attributes play in the implementation of market-driving

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strategy implementation. For instance, important questions remain unanswered, such as: “What are the prominent characteristics of top management that facilitate the implementation of market-driving strategy?” and “What are the traits of middle-level employees that reinforce implementation of this strategy?” The research project at hand responds to these challenging queries with the aim of filling the respective research gaps.

In this regard, the overall scope of the study is encompassed within the broader body of literature linking market orientation and personnel characteristics (e.g., Kirca et al., 2005; Lancaster & Van Der Velden, 2004). Moreover, its precise objectives are to identify the most important characteristics (1) of top management, and (2) of middle-level employees that facilitate the implementation of market-driving strategy. In particular, the study focuses on certain aspects, namely, skills and personality traits of top management and middle-level employees that are closely related to the market-driving concept (including vision, prediction skills and insightfulness, creativity, expertise, and flexibility). This means that, adopting a funnel approach, we begin our inquiry from the relationship between market orientation and personnel characteristics; we then narrow our focus to the interplay between market-driving strategy and personnel characteristics; and we conclude with the relevant personnel attributes that comprise the principal findings and borderlines of our study.

Overall, our research contributes to the literature in the following ways. (1) To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to focus on the importance of personnel characteristics in the field of market-driving strategy. (2) This is the only study to shed light on both top and middle organizational levels, contrasting one with the other and identifying their commonalities and differences. (3) This is the first time that specific traits of top management (i.e., open-minded policy, strong vision, strategic human resource management, transformational leadership, prediction skills and insightfulness, and fostering creativity) and characteristics of middle-level employees (i.e., open-minded policy, transformational leadership, creativity, expertise, intrapreneurship, commitment, and flexibility), are highlighted as antecedents of market-driving strategy. (4) This study is the first to provide empirical findings verifying previous theoretical arguments which emphasized the importance for the market-driving concept of factors such as creativity (Kumar, Scheer, & Kotler, 2000), transformational leadership (Carrillat et al., 2004), and flexibility (Johnson, Lee, Saini, & Grohmann, 2003). (5) Moreover, our findings empirically affirm for the first time the theoretical notion that market-driven and market-driving strategies have a subset of antecedents in common (Neuenburg, 2010). (6) Finally, by bringing the role of intrapreneurship to the fore, we significantly extend the work of Schindehutte, Morris, and Kocak (2008), Zortea-Johnston, Darroch, and Matear (2012), and Chen et al. (2012), who linked market-driving strategy with the concept of entrepreneurship.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The market orientation domain

The idea of being market-oriented is not new. Drucker (1954) was among the first to highlight the importance of the customer as the focal point of business practice. Subsequently, a series of articles has been published on the subject. By considering all streams of the literature, it becomes evident that the market orientation domain (e.g., Foltean & Feder, 2009; Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013) can be described as a spectrum consisting of three facets. The first facet, known as the market-driven strategy, refers to a traditional business strategy grounded in understanding and reacting to the preferences and behaviors of players within a given market structure (Jaworski et al., 2000). The second facet, termed market-driving strategy, pertains to influencing the structure of the market or the behavior(s) of market players in a direction that enhances the competitive posture of the business

(Jaworski et al., 2000). Finally, the third facet, named proactive market orientation (Herhausen, 2016; Narver, Slater, & MacLachlan, 2004) represents the type of market orientation that seeks to understand and satisfy both articulated and latent needs, yet without altering market conditions (Neuenburg, 2010).

2.2. Market-driving strategy

Market-driving strategy reflects a firm's ability to drive fundamental changes as to the evolution of conditions within a particular industry. Contrary to firms that employ a market-driven or a proactive market-orientation approach, firms that adopt a market-driving approach, also known as “market drivers,” behave proactively by educating and leading their customers, thereby shaping the behavior of those customers. In addition, such firms fundamentally modify or create new markets, ultimately changing the “rules of the game” or influencing the evolution of their industry, rather than passively responding to such evolution (Chen et al., 2012; Harris & Cai, 2002). Thus, instead of giving customers what they want, market drivers educate customers to “learn” what they want (Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 2001). Therefore, market drivers emphasize not only customers' denoted needs but also their latent needs (Hills & Sarin, 2003). The strategy of enterprises such as IKEA, Starbucks, De Beers, Sony, Amazon.com, Apple, Virgin, Walmart, and Benetton (Filieri, 2015; Schindehutte et al., 2008), for example, has been characterized over the years by revolutionary business models, disruptive innovation, and a discontinuous leap in the value proposition, all of which are prominent traits of a market-driving strategy (Kumar et al., 2000).

2.3. The role of top management in a market-driving firm

Despite the profound importance of the top management team in every market-oriented firm (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Kirca et al., 2005), its characteristics have received scant attention within a market-driving firm context. First, in this context, the top management team is responsible for establishing a culture of creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovativeness (Blut, Holzmüller, & Stolper, 2012; Chen et al., 2012; Zortea-Johnston et al., 2012). Second, from a conceptual standpoint, the top management is responsible for empowering latent entrepreneurs, approving new ideas, establishing competitive teams, and tolerating mistakes within the firm (Kumar et al., 2000). Third, the importance of transformational leadership and an adhocracy type of culture (i.e. external/informal) have already been emphasized theoretically (Carrillat et al., 2004). Finally, the top management team is basically responsible for developing an array of organizational capabilities within the firm, namely configuration, networking, knowledge transfer, internal branding, and learning (Ghauri et al., 2016; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015).

2.4. Investigating 10 characteristics of top management

In order to sufficiently map the most important top management and middle management characteristics, we broke down our overarching research objective into two distinguishable subobjectives: the “unaided” objective, the disclosure of respondents' spontaneous opinions regarding the characteristics that top management and middle-level employees should have in a market-driving firm; and the “aided” objective, the disclosure of respondents' beliefs in response to two shortlists of potentially relevant characteristics that top management and middle-level employees should have in such a firm. In order to approach the latter objective, we created a shortlist of 10 potential top management characteristics: (1) transformational leadership, (2) fostering creativity, (3) fostering open-mindedness, (4) fostering freedom of opinion-sharing, (5) fostering risk-taking, (6) encouraging new idea generation, (7) tolerating mistakes, (8) having strong corporate vision, (9) encouraging participative decision-making, and (10) keeping the

Table 1
Investigating 10 characteristics of top management.

Concept	Definition	Relevance to market-driving strategy	Sources
(1) Transformational leadership	Type of leadership in which the leader, beyond merely administering rewards and punishments, demonstrates charisma, inspires organizational members, and provides intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.	Has been theoretically stressed as the most appropriate leadership type that fosters a market-driving culture. Conveys the market-driving vision, stimulates employees' creativity, and impacts innovative capacity.	Bass (1990) MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich (2001) Carrillat et al. (2004)
(2) Fostering creativity	The ability displayed when developing novel solutions to existing problems.	Reexamines work assumptions, improves performance, and leads to breakthrough innovations that reshape business systems. Furthermore, it improves the value proposition.	Parkhurst (1999) Kumar et al. (2000) Carrillat et al. (2004)
(3) Fostering open-mindedness	A trait that qualifies a person's activities in thinking; i.e., his/her ability and willingness to form and revise his/her views in light of evidence and argumentation.	Associated with unlearning, proactively questions existing organizational routines, modifies organizational assumptions, and facilitates organizational innovation. Generates out-of-the-box ideas that can be sources of market-driving ideas.	Siegel (2009) Hernández-Mogollon, Cepeda-Carrión, Cegarra-Navarro, and Leal-Millán (2010)
(4) Fostering freedom of opinion-sharing	Open exchange of personal opinions and useful information regarding a subject of interest.	Fosters dialogue, triggers novel idea generation, stimulates polyphony, generates synergies, and improves teamwork, concepts highly necessary for market-driving firms.	Ku, Wei, and Hsiao (2012) Paridon (2004)
(5) Fostering risk-taking	The degree to which managers are willing to make large and risky resource commitments (i.e., those that have a reasonable chance of costly failure).	Associated with a tendency to be optimistic and perceive opportunities. Triggers performance. Fosters entrepreneurial cultures in market-driving firms that operate in turbulent environments, where risk and failure are possible outcomes.	Miller and Friesen (1978) Dai, Maksimov, Gilbert, and Fernhaber (2014)
(6) Fostering new idea generation	One of the first stages of problem solving or decision-making, in which potential solutions, decision alternatives, or hypotheses are generated. Involves creating new concepts, plans, and themes.	Relates to creativity and is critical to (1) new product development, (2) marketing strategy, and (3) marketing activities. Market-driving firms ground their success on innovative ideas that allow them to preempt competition.	Nijstad and Stroebe (2006) Toubia (2006)
(7) Tolerating mistakes	The conditions within an organization that allow organizational members to take risks and pursue innovative solutions without the fear of repercussions for making mistakes.	Improves knowledge, leads to intelligent risk-taking, increases performance, enhances exploration learning, and triggers critical thought, concepts highly relevant for market-driving strategy.	Weinzimmer and Esken (2017) Ellis, Mendel, and Nir (2006) Chen et al. (2012)
(8) Having strong corporate vision	A mental perception of the kind of environment an individual or organization aspires to create within a broad time horizon.	Relates to proactive management. Results in offerings that reveal new consumer needs. Gives orientation to employees. Develops the market-driving firms' activities around their top management teams' inspirations.	El-Namaki (1992) Blut et al., 2012Carrillat et al. (2004)
(9) Encouraging participative decision-making	The totality of ways in which individuals, groups, or collectives contribute to the choice process through self-determined choices among possible actions during the decision process.	Reinforces employees' commitment, enhances task performance, triggers job satisfaction, reduces turnover, and increases the employees' supportiveness toward the market-driving idea.	Heller, Pusic, Wilpert, and Strauss (1998) Lam, Chen, and Schaubroeck (2002)
(10) Keeping locus of decision-making close to customers	Empowering front-line employees who interact with customers, in an effort to take advantage of available customer information.	Creates a customer-centric organization. Develops a thorough understanding of current market conditions. Analyzes current market information, identifies relevant gaps and opportunities, and results in emergence of subsequent innovative ideas.	Selden and MacMillan (2006) Gulati and Oldroyd (2005)

locus of decision-making close to customers. Information about the definitions of these characteristics and their relevance to market-driving strategy is included in Table 1.

We decided to test this shortlist in an effort to narrow the focus of our investigation and to triangulate and cross-validate the dimensions of the interviews via the various questions asked (Flick, 2004; Thurmond, 2001). While the above shortlist is not exhaustive, it comprises a first exploratory step toward producing interesting insights on the topic. These specific characteristics were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: (1) parsimony, so that a feasible number of characteristics could be tested; (2) potential relevance, so that the chosen characteristics were notionally related to the market-driving concept; (3) necessity for theory testing, meaning that we selected characteristics grounded in conceptual studies of market-driving strategy (e.g., Kumar et al., 2000); acknowledging the need for empirical verification for the first time in the field of the importance of such characteristics; (4) potential contribution, meaning that we chose specific characteristics from the broader management literature whose relevance to the market-driving concept has not been tested before; and (5) research interest, meaning that we focused on constructs that overlap with our scientific concerns.

2.5. The role of middle-level employees in a market-driving firm

Perhaps the most critical sources of competitive advantage for any firm are its human resources across all organizational levels (Pfeffer, 1995). The same applies to the successful implementation of market-driving strategy. Along such lines, theorists have underlined the importance of encouraging employees to demonstrate creativity, generate new ideas, and act as latent entrepreneurs within the firm (Kumar et al., 2000). Moreover, it has been conceptually demonstrated that the human factor is crucial in creating a market-driving culture, since hiring, retaining, and training individuals with transformational leadership skills are factors of high significance (Carrillat et al., 2004). In addition, there have been assertions regarding the importance of entrepreneurial human capital, as well as the employees' ability to determine change for the market-driving approach (Blut et al., 2012; Van Vuuren & Wörgötter, 2013). Finally, the employees' participative role in co-creating market-driving strategy has been stressed. In particular, Tarnovskaya, Elg, and Burt (2008), who focused on IKEA, explained that the establishment of market-driving strategy started from the inside, since IKEA's employees personified the firm's vision and values, while their competencies facilitated the firm's strategy.

Table 2
Investigating 10 characteristics of middle-level employees.

Concept	Definition	Relevance to market-driving strategy	Sources
(1) Transformational leadership	Type of leadership in which the leader, beyond merely administering rewards and punishments, demonstrates charisma, inspires organizational members, and provides intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.	Has been theoretically emphasized as the most appropriate leadership type that can foster a market-driving culture. Conveys the market-driving vision, stimulates employees' creativity, and impacts innovative capacity.	Bass (1990) MacKenzie et al. (2001) Carrillat et al. (2004)
(2) Intrapreneurship	Entrepreneurship within an existing organization via behaviors that depart from what is considered customary in order to pursue opportunities.	Creates economic value, increases performance, revitalizes businesses, triggers innovativeness, and enhances overall performance.	Antoncic and Hisrich (2003) Schindehutte et al. (2008) Zortea-Johnston et al. (2012) Parker (2011)
(3) Creativity	The ability displayed when developing novel solutions to existing problems.	Reexamines work assumptions, improves performance, leads to breakthrough innovations that reshape business systems, and improves the value proposition.	Parkhurst (1999) Kumar et al. (2000) Carrillat et al. (2004)
(4) Self-confidence	An employee's self-esteem; his/her self-assurance regarding a decision he/she has to make, such as performing a specific task or solving a specific problem.	Can be a key to personal success. Enhances individual motivation, personal satisfaction, and persuasive ability. Makes subordinates feel safe and triggers their performance.	Locander and Hermann (1979) Bénabou and Tirole (2002) Stankov and Crawford (1997)
(5) Commitment	A force that binds an individual to a course of action that is of relevance to a particular target.	Implies a desire and intent to remain, increases attendance, enhances employee retention, and drives job performance. Makes employees believe in the organization's goals, exert considerable effort, and desire to maintain membership. Increases their supportiveness of the market-driving idea.	Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) Steers (1977)
(6) Risk-taking	The degree to which managers are willing to make large and risky resource commitments (i.e., those that have a reasonable chance of costly failure).	Is associated with a tendency to be optimistic and perceive opportunities rather than threats. Can trigger performance. Enhances market-driving firms' entrepreneurial cultures. Guides their operation in turbulent environments where risk and failure are possible outcomes.	Miller and Friesen (1978) Dai et al. (2014)
(7) Individual adaptability	An individual's skill, disposition, willingness, or motivation to exhibit different task, social, and environmental features.	Drives effective performance in complex environments. Entails the competency of successfully adjusting to long-term, changing work contexts. Helps market-driving firms adapt in competitive, complex, and volatile environments.	Ployhart and Bliese (2006) Van Dam, Oreg, and Michel (2013)
(8) Competitiveness	The desire to win in interpersonal situations.	Mediates the link between personality and group performance. Is related to status consciousness and increases ambition. Helps market-driving firms to surpass competition and obtain sustainable competitive advantage.	Houston, Farese, and La Du (1992) Graziano, Hair, and Finch (1997)
(9) Flexibility	The ability to adjust behavior, management, and leadership styles to a variety of situations and stakeholder groups.	Expresses the ability to bend to (usually short-term) challenges and conditions. Can lead market-driving firms to sustainable competitive advantage. Individual flexibility drives organizational flexibility, career success, and job performance.	Iles, Forster, & Tinline, 1996 Johnson et al. (2003)
(10) Open-mindedness	A trait that qualifies a person's activities in thinking; i.e., his/her ability and willingness to form and revise his/her views in the light of evidence and argumentation.	Associated with unlearning, proactively questions existing organizational routines, modifies organizational assumptions, and facilitates organizational innovation. Generates out-of-the-box ideas that can be sources of market-driving ideas.	Siegel (2009) Hernández-Mogollon et al. (2010)

2.6. Investigating 10 characteristics of middle-level employees

Similar to the procedure followed for top management, we created a shortlist of 10 potential characteristics of middle-level employees: (1) transformational leadership, (2) intrapreneurship, (3) creativity, (4) self-confidence, (5) commitment, (6) risk-taking, (7) individual adaptability, (8) competitiveness, (9) flexibility, and (10) open-mindedness. The criteria we used to select these specific characteristics were the same as those used for top management (see Section 2.4). Information about the respective definitions and the relevance of these concepts to market-driving strategy is summarized in Table 2.

3. Research methodology

In order to approach our topic empirically, we adopted an exploratory qualitative research design by conducting in-depth interviews. It is notable that no empirical study has so far been published

that investigates the relationship of personnel attributes within the market-driving research area. Consequently, an exploratory research design and, more precisely, in-depth interviewing is a suitable approach, given that existing knowledge on the topic is limited (Graebner, Martin, & Roundy, 2012; Pratt, 2009). Indeed, Creswell (2008) explains that if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach, while Morse (1991) further endorses qualitative designs as appropriate when the topic is new or has never been addressed with a certain group of people.

In particular, we interviewed 27 experts who, through their daily work experiences, have in-depth knowledge on market-driving strategy. In an attempt to incorporate the insights of both academics and practitioners, the key respondents chosen comprised seven academic experts and 20 higher-level marketing executives of market-driving firms. The respondents' average working experience was more than 16 years. The qualitative study was conducted in Greece. Greece was selected as

Table 3
Sample description.

Number	Sector	Firm profile	Relationship with market-driving strategy
Firm 1	Commodities	A large established and powerful multinational firm with strong resources.	Has strongly driven the behaviors of the state, the regulators and the multipliers (wider society, investors, media, etc.) via strategic and integrated communication campaigns, exploiting its powerful brand name and its influence over the state's economy.
Firm 2	Retailing	A large established firm of domestic background with activities in the wider region of southeastern Europe.	Has demonstrated strong market-driving behavior, by driving the behavior of its customers toward high value for money goods and its suppliers toward advantageous agreements.
Firm 3	Services	A small domestic and flexible firm.	Has been given awards for successfully driving the behaviors of customers (e.g., tourists) and multipliers (media, institutions, etc.), by pioneering in the fields of Sports Tourism (enriching tourist products).
Firm 4	Cosmetics	A large established multinational firm with strong resources.	Has successfully implemented the market-driving concept (1) at the product level, by investing in R&D activities and introducing successful innovative products, thus shaping customer preferences, and (2) at the distributors' level, by influencing and shaping a network of 6,000,000 distributors in more than 100 countries.
Firm 5	Foods & beverages	A large established multinational firm with strong resources; one of the traditional world leaders in its sector.	At certain points in its history, has driven its markets at the product level by introducing differentiated products that were a point of reference in its sector, thus driving customers' preferences and behavior.
Firm 6	Foods & beverages	A large established multinational organization with strong resources; one of the world leaders in its sector.	Has heavily invested in R&D activities. Has successfully driven (1) the behavior of customers at the product level, by introducing innovative products, and (2) the behavior of healthcare professionals with integrated marketing campaigns.
Firm 7	Services	A large established multinational organization with strong resources, one of the world leaders in its sector.	Is an expert in the field of consulting services with powerful marketplace position. Continuously develops new approaches for addressing its customers; has heavily invested in new technologies and developed strategic alliances with partners.
Firm 8	Cosmetics	A large established multinational firm; one of the world leaders in the sector of personal care.	Has heavily invested in research and technology innovation (including non-invasive imagery, robotics, and 3-D modeling). Has introduced numerous innovative products, thus shaping customers' preferences and becoming a point of reference in its sector.
Firm 9	Technology, e-commerce	A medium-sized flexible startup firm of domestic background, with activities in the wider region of southeastern Europe.	Has revolutionized the industry of high technology by introducing an innovative search engine that compares prices. Its unique business model has changed the way consumers purchase goods, moving from traditional channels to its electronic platform. Has also led to the development of numerous e-shops operating around its platform.
Firm 10	High technology, online food delivery	A medium-sized flexible domestic startup firm with high growth rates.	Has revolutionized the industry of food delivery by introducing an innovative electronic platform. Its business model has shifted the way consumers purchase delivery food, moving from traditional ways to the use of its electronic platform.
Firm 11	B-to-B construction, manufacturing	A large established multinational firm with strong resources.	Has heavily invested in R&D and developed cutting edge product solutions and pioneering technologies (e.g., smart pumps and facilities, energy efficient solutions, heating, air conditioning, and water supply). Has subsequently driven the behavior of its industrial clients.
Firm 12	Telecommunications, energy, electrification, healthcare, high technology, services	A large established multinational firm with strong resources.	Has driven its markets at certain points in its history. Continuously introduces state-of-the-art technologically advanced products (e.g., integrated automation technologies and 3-D printing); drives the behavior of the state, regulators and multipliers (e.g., wider society and investors), exploiting its influence over the state's economy.
Firm 13	High technology, healthcare	A medium-sized flexible domestic startup firm.	Has revolutionized the industry of healthcare by introducing an innovative digital service. Its business model has shifted the way patients reach healthcare professionals, moving from traditional ways to the use of its electronic platform.
Firm 14	B-to-B services	A large established multinational firm with strong resources; one of the world leaders in its sector.	Is the market leader in its field and has set its industry's standards. Has developed specialized and flexible Strategic Business Units in order to offer integrated customized service solutions. Has assisted its clients to intervene during consumers' evaluation of alternatives at numerous selling points.
Firm 15	Telecommunications	A large established multinational firm with strong resources; one of the world leaders in its sector.	Has heavily invested in technology; has successfully driven its multipliers (e.g., wider society, investors, and media) via communication campaigns and sponsorships, positioning a powerful brand image.
Firm 16	Services	A medium, domestic and flexible firm.	Has defined creativity as its core corporate value. Has developed a customer-centric structure in order to provide customized solutions. Is a pioneer in creating local and international content. Has driven the behavior of multipliers (e.g. wider society, media and so forth).
Firm 17	Foods & beverages	A large established multinational firm with strong resources; one of the world leaders in its sector.	At certain points in its history has shaped consumer preferences by introducing iconic products; has driven the behavior of its distributors, exploiting its negotiating power; has successfully driven its multipliers (e.g., wider society, investors, and media) via communication campaigns and sponsorships.

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Number	Sector	Firm profile	Relationship with market-driving strategy
Firm 18	Cosmetics	A large established firm of domestic background with strong resources and activities in more than 30 countries.	Has shifted consumer preferences from chemical-based products to natural products; has driven the behavior of its distributors, exploiting its negotiating power; has successfully driven its multipliers (e.g., wider society, investors, and media).
Firm 19	High technology, retailing	A large established domestic firm, with strong resources; one of the market leaders in its sector.	Has heavily invested in technology and innovation; has successfully driven both its suppliers (via advantageous agreements) and its multipliers (e.g., wider society, investors, and media), therefore building a powerful brand name.
Firm 20	High technology, tourism	A large established multinational firm, with strong resources; one of the world leaders in its sector.	Has revolutionized the tourism sector, by developing an online platform for booking accommodation, therefore, driving customer preferences. Has influenced many providers of touristic products, by exploiting its power.

an appropriate setting for the study, given the turbulent specificities and contextual factors of its markets (Matsaganis, 2011; Zavras, Tsiantou, Pavi, Mylona, & Kyriopoulos, 2012). According to Blut et al. (2012) and Neuenburg (2010), market turbulence and technology turbulence act as principal moderators of the relationship between market-driving strategy and performance. Therefore, turbulent environments trigger the development of market-driving firms. Twenty interviews were conducted between fall 2016 and winter 2017, while seven additional interviews were performed in the spring of 2018. Considering the specificities of both the topic and the local market (e.g., shortage of an accurate sampling frame), a purposive sampling methodology was implemented combined with the snowball technique (Parasuraman, Grewal, & Krishnan, 2004). We concluded data collection when we reached a saturation point (Dworkin, 2012) (i.e., the point at which very little new evidence was obtained from each additional fieldwork unit). The duration of the interviews ranged from 50 to 115 min, with an average of approximately 77 min. Table 3 provides information about the profiles of the 20 firms and their relevance to the market-driving concept.

A semi-structured interview format was employed, which allowed us to ask a standard set of questions and to react with relevant probing techniques (Daymon & Holloway, 2010), dependent upon the interviewees' responses. The interviews were based on an interview guide that covered a broad array of aspects regarding market-driving strategy. The interview guide was developed by following established guidelines (Mason, 2002; Rowley, 2012). It was revised by seven academic experts, and was extensively pretested until corrections reached a saturation point (i.e., a point after which responses didn't provide any additional insight).

In the introductory part of the interview guide, the definition of market-driving strategy and several examples of market-driving firms were discussed with the interviewees. Building further on our respective research objectives, four broad sections of questions were asked. Section A1 was an unaided, "grand tour" section (Daymon & Holloway, 2010), where respondents were directly asked to spontaneously provide their opinions about the characteristics that top management in a market-driving firm should have. A2 comprised an aided "mini tour" section (Daymon & Holloway, 2010), where a shortlist including the foregoing 10 top management characteristics was verbally described to the respondents. Then, each respondent was asked to comment on the role of each of those characteristics for a market-driving firm and to justify his/her opinion. B1 formed an unaided, "grand tour" section, where respondents were directly asked to spontaneously outline their standpoints on the characteristics that middle-level employees should have in a market-driving firm. Finally, B2 was an aided "mini tour" section, where a shortlist including the above-mentioned 10 middle-level employee characteristics was verbally described to the respondents. As in section A2, each respondent was asked to comment on the significance of each of those characteristics for a market-driving firm, and justify his/her opinion. The phrasing used throughout the interview process was grounded in extant theory and

definitions of the relevant constructs. Special attention was paid by the interviewers to ensuring that the respondents answered each section in a fully unbiased way. For example, in Sections A2 and B2, respondents had full freedom to elaborate on and to accept or decline the role of each characteristic (i.e., as favorable, unfavorable, or neutral) without any misleading restrictions.

4. Data analysis

The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Adopting previously established guidelines (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schreier, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we analyzed the qualitative data by implementing the analytical technique of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2014). The interview material was analyzed by generating categories in an inductive (data-driven) way, as proposed by Schreier (2012). All interviews were coded in accordance with the coding frame resulting from the inductively generated categories. As a starting point, we analyzed each interview separately. Next, we compared the interviews across categories to identify similarities, differences, and patterns. In general, data analysis was carried out in an iterative cyclic fashion, going back and forth between the qualitative data and the emerging structure of the theoretical arguments (Daymon & Holloway, 2010; Schreier, 2012).

In order to account for the reliability of the coding procedure, two independent coders collaborated, following a blind coding procedure. The overall coefficient of agreement between the two coders for all units of coding was 95.41%. However, a simple coefficient of agreement usually overestimates actual agreement, given that it does not take into account the possibility of agreement by chance alone. To address this concern, we calculated Cohen's kappa coefficient of agreement for each section of the transcripts. Sections A1, A2, B1, and B2 had kappa coefficients of 93.4%, 91.3%, 91.0%, and 93.6%, respectively—values that exceed the suggested 80% threshold (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Popping, 1988) and indicate satisfactory intercoder reliability. Disagreements were addressed by the two coders debating and jointly resolving discrepancies. With regard to the validity of the coding frame, the inductive method of coding is one way in which to ensure that the coding frame captures what it sets out to capture (Schreier, 2012). In addition, face validity was enhanced in the following four ways: (1) a pilot coding procedure was part of the cyclic coding process, which improved the accuracy of the coding frame; (2) the residual categories had low coding frequencies compared to the other subcategories; (3) no subcategory had extremely high frequency compared to the other subcategories; (4) the level of abstraction employed to summarize and reduce the material was kept to a medium level, and the coding frame was not underdifferentiated (Schreier, 2012).

5. Findings, conceptual framework, and research propositions

Intriguing consistent commonalities across participants emerged

Table 4
Overview of main findings.

Top management Unaided Section A1	Top management Aided Section A2	Middle management Unaided Section B1	Middle management Aided Section B2
1. Open-minded policy 2. Having strong vision 3. Strategic human resource management 4. Transformational leadership 5. Prediction skills and insightfulness	1. Transformational leadership 2. Fostering creativity 3. Having strong vision	1. Open-minded policy 2. Expertise 3. Transformational leadership 4. Commitment	1. Intrapreneurship 2. Creativity 3. Flexibility 4. Transformational leadership

from all sections of questions asked. Our principal findings are summarized in Table 4.

Grounded in the response patterns, it became evident that some traits are equally important for both top management and middle management levels, while certain other traits have varying significance depending on the organizational level. In other words, certain characteristics appear to overlap and have “universal importance” for market-driving firms, spanning across organizational levels, while at the same time other traits appear to have different weights and magnitudes for top management compared to middle management. Building upon these findings, we developed the conceptual framework depicted in Fig. 1.

We now proceed to the presentation of our principal results and formulate our respective research propositions.

5.1. Overlapping common traits

The first common trait that emerged from the interviewees' responses was a notion we term “open-minded policy.” This notion was characterized by open communication, open-door policy, open-mindedness, receptiveness to feedback and criticism, and receptiveness to change. Many respondents highlighted the importance of top managers being open-minded, being open to new stimuli, being aware of opinions, criticism, and feedback from their subordinates, allowing bidirectional communication, and implementing an open-door policy. Some characteristic quotes here were:

- *The top management must have the ability to listen and take the distillate of all internal opinions; by listening to people inside the company, sometimes a very big opportunity can be conceived.*
- *They must be able to listen and accept the fact that their subordinates have opinions and perceptions; they have to allow and accept bottom-up*

communication; they have to be open to listening to new things; in this way, something new may be created.

The same finding was consistent for middle-level employees. In particular, in the respective part of the interviews, several interviewees described the ideal middle-level employee as an open-minded spirit who is open to new ideas, willing to learn, and receptive to both feedback and criticism. For example, some respondents underlined:

- *Middle-level employees have to implement a policy of open doors; they have to be open to new ideas and, similarly to the top management, they have to listen to their subordinates; they have to provide freedom for others to express their ideas; often something good results from simple employees; you have to listen, you don't know everything.*
- *Your antennas must be constantly open; in this way you will obtain the right perception of reality; if you don't, you will have prejudices and misleading obsessions that will make you outdated and obsolete.*

Therefore, we formulate the following research proposition:

Research Proposition 1. *Top management's and middle management's open-minded policy is positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This first proposition delineates that both top and middle-management teams can enhance the emergence of creative behaviors and innovative ideas by listening to the voices of lower-level employees. It also implies the pitfalls of narrow-minded, egocentric managers who very often have detrimental thought worlds and mental representations of marketplace conditions. Here, it surfaces for the first time in the literature that changing a market often presupposes changing the organization and synthesizing all internal opinions.

The second trait that appeared to have overlapping significance for both top and middle levels was transformational leadership. Most of the

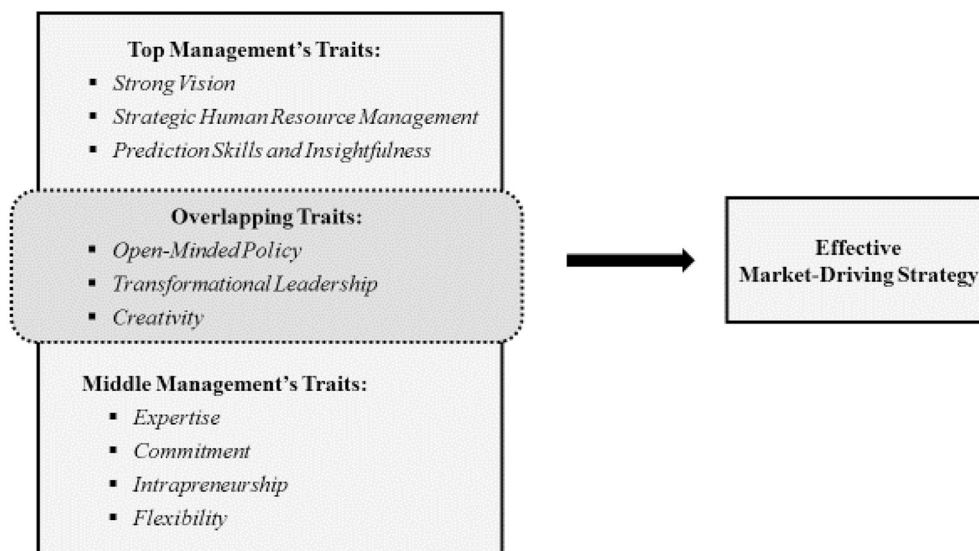


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

interviewees underscored the importance of top managers developing superior leadership skills, inducing transformations, demonstrating charisma, and inspiring their subordinates instead of merely compensating them:

- *For sure, leadership is a big part of a market-driving firm, giving direction to everyone; employees must be inspired to go somewhere; a simple reward or punishment is not sufficient; the leader must give the example, guide, and inspire the employees.*
- *The top management must have corporate values and all elements of a transformational leader; they have to lead by example and inspire respect; when you inspire, people follow you, they believe in your decision, and they work hard for its implementation.*

The same trait gained noteworthy support for the middle-management level as well. Again, some of the respondents highlighted that middle-level employees must be characterized by corresponding transformational leadership skills in order to inspire lower-level employees and stimulate them to follow the firm's vision voluntarily:

- *A market-driving firm ideally has people with leadership skills in all organizational levels; middle-level employees, similarly to the top management, must have a leadership profile in order to convey the market-driving culture from the top management to the lower-level employees; they have to motivate them, convey the vision, lead the way, and show the desired direction.*
- *According to my thinking, there are doers and leaders. You cannot just simply be a doer in such strategy. You've got to have the strength to make a decision, not be afraid, and manage your group. As top management treats middle management, that's exactly how middle management should treat lower hierarchical levels.*

Thus, we formulate the following proposition:

Research Proposition 2. *Top management's and middle management's transformational leadership skills are positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This second proposition underlines that, given the innovative and creative traits of market-driving organizations and the corresponding attributes of their personnel, transformational leadership is the only form of leadership that can lead to satisfied, empowered, and truly fulfilled employees. This can subsequently cultivate learning, commitment, creativity, innovation, and success for the firm (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). This proposition is also the very first in the field to empirically verify the conceptual work of Carrillat et al. (2004).

The final characteristic that appeared to have equal weight and significance for both top and middle managers was creativity. With regard to the top management team, many interviewees acknowledged the importance of top managers fostering creativity throughout the organization and giving the necessary space for all employees to engage in unconventional approaches and the creation of novel and original ideas. Some illuminating quotes here include the following:

- *Given that you want to break the rules of the game and discover new ways of approaching and satisfying customers, you have to be creative and create new ideas; you have to think differently.*
- *The leader must promote creativity; if not, the firm stays static, stops evolving, and fails to create something new. Creativity creates innovation and new things; for example, we try to be creative in our branding strategy, we implement non-brand-safe practices in an effort to become a cool brand. Our competitors don't, and in this way, consumers come close to us, because we are close to customers.*

In harmony with the views expressed about top management, the same trait evoked strong support from many respondents for middle-level employees; their ability to be creative and to develop

unconventional approaches to their everyday duties was deemed a factor of high importance for market drivers. In the words of some interviewees:

- *Without creativity, employees will never offer anything new; they will remain on conventional paths; therefore, the way they address their market will remain the same.*
- *In order to successfully implement a market-driving strategy, the whole firm has to be creative; therefore, employees that offer ideas for the firm's innovativeness are an important element; creativity also favors the change that this strategy demands.*

Along such lines, we formulate the following proposition:

Research Proposition 3. *Top management's fostering creativity and middle management's creativity skills are positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This third proposition empirically endorses the theoretical premises of Kumar et al. (2000) for the first time. When employees perform creatively, they suggest novel products, ideas, or procedures that can stimulate the organization's success (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). However, it is the consistency of approval of creativity from all organizational levels that makes creativity a cornerstone and a significant virtue for market drivers, a claim empirically confirmed by this research proposition.

5.2. Top management's traits

Closely following the respondents' answers, it appears that certain characteristics of top management emerge as highly important for the top hierarchical levels, but are not equally important for the middle hierarchical levels. These traits outline the different roles top managers have to play in contrast to middle-level employees.

In this section, the first favorable answering pattern was related to the concept of strong corporate vision, which gained support from respondents in both the aided and unaided sections of the interviews. More precisely, several interviewees pinpointed the importance of top managers having and conveying a strong, clear, and innovative vision that guides the whole organization and keeps organizational members aligned. As some respondents explained:

- *Top management must have a missionary sense; something like "I have something in my mind, a mission that is extremely important; something that surpasses me, that is going to change my life and other peoples' lives; it fascinates me, it mesmerizes me, and I want to pursue it."*
- *The vision is extremely important because it urges employees to move toward the same direction; it is inspirational. Employees feel they have a higher objective they try to accomplish. It gives meaning to their jobs; they feel they are resolving important problems for their industry or society.*

In this regard, we formulate the following research proposition:

Research Proposition 4. *Top management's strong corporate vision is positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This fourth proposition asserts that a strong corporate vision can guide the market-driving organization's destiny, trigger creative strategies, and change corporate cultures (El-Namaki, 1992). This means that in market drivers it is crucial for top managers to crystalize and endorse visions that are realistic, feasible, clear, challenging, and translatable into goals. This finding confirms both empirically and theoretically the practical examples of several market-driving firms, developed around strong corporate visions of their leading teams (among others, Apple, Tesla, and Amazon).

Strategic management of human resources was also mentioned by many interviewees as of central importance to top managers. Several

answers underscored the importance of being anthropocentric, of effectively managing other employees, and of regarding them as a resource through which the market-driving firm can derive and implement innovation. For example, some respondents stated:

- *What top managers have achieved in our firm is that they have been employees themselves; they have started from very low. They hate the term “boss,” and they know how to treat an employee in terms of rewards and overall confrontation. One of our founders has a motto: In a time where everybody talks about evaluations, profits, and money, the most crucial factor is the fun factor; to create a firm where people have fun.*
- *Top managers must realize that, for the type of personnel market drivers attract, maybe things beyond the customary are involved; for example, a sales bonus may not fulfill an employee in such a profile.*

In light of these arguments, we formulate the following proposition:

Research Proposition 5. *Top management's strategic human resource management practices are positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This fifth proposition explicates the importance of developing appropriate human resource policies that are consistent with organizational strategy. These policies significantly drive performance, while develop synergies with traditional market-oriented behaviors (Harris & Ogbonna, 2001). Therefore, such practices are fundamental for both market-driving and market-driven firms. As a result, this finding empirically affirms the theoretical notion that market-driven and market-driving strategies have a subset of antecedents in common (Neuenburg, 2010). This means that market-driving strategy starts from inside the firm, and this trait comprises an “X factor” for firms aspiring to shape their markets.

The final response pattern in this section encompassed the importance of top management's prediction skills and insightfulness. A certain body of respondents stressed the importance of forward sensing, predicting future tendencies and outcomes, and being perspicacious, in order to identify gaps in the market and avoid pitfalls. For example, some interviewees argued:

- *The top management must be forward sensing while looking back at the same time. It has to be insightful and look forward, but refrain from believing that past practices axiomatically will continue to lead to success in the future. It has to stay constantly vigilant.*
- *The top management must have insight in the industry they want to change; they must look far away and not be interested in short-term success, or success during their own tenure alone.*

Based on the foregoing evidence, we formulate the following research proposition:

Research Proposition 6. *Top management's prediction skills and insightfulness are positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This sixth proposition delineates the importance of the top management's abilities in being able to make predictions and provide guidance through insightful and alert behaviors. If top managers do not accurately predict market tendencies, lag in following the evolution of the industry, or overestimate their firms' abilities, then they lose alignment with the market's needs, with catastrophic results for the organization. This is a proposition that has not been identified in the literature so far. Given that market drivers usually operate in highly turbulent and competitive environments, prediction skills can help them exploit opportunities, make the right strategic maneuvers and sustain competitive advantage over time.

5.3. Middle management's traits

Moving on to the middle-level employees, per respondents' answers it was clear that certain traits had higher importance for the middle

hierarchical levels and lower weight for the top hierarchical levels. These traits described the different roles middle-level employees have to play in relation to their superiors.

First, middle-level employees' expertise (i.e., a combination of knowledge, experience, and strong educational background) appears to play a crucial role for market-driving firms. Several responses described the importance of having expert middle managers in every working role in order to drive organizational performance. For example, some respondents asserted:

- *Market-driving firms cannot afford not to have experts in every field with strong professional backgrounds in order to comprehend the reality that surrounds them.*
- *They must have strong expertise, namely a combination of experience and knowledge. They have to be trained individuals with competencies and perfect knowledge of their specialization. They must be experts with an encyclopedic perception of an open and contemporary world.*

Based on these findings, we formulate the following proposition:

Research Proposition 7. *Middle-level employees' expertise is positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This seventh proposition stresses that, in market drivers, expertise is crucial for middle organizational levels. However, what is interesting in this finding is that it is not a necessary condition for top levels. Listening to the voice of lower levels and making well-aimed strategic choices are the primary skills top managers need. In contrast, middle-level employees have to be experts, and they constitute the driving force that will lead the organization toward excellence and market dominance. Hence, market drivers have to employ experts in all middle-level specializations.

The next noteworthy response pattern in this section was relevant to the notion of organizational commitment. Several interviewees stressed the importance of middle-level employees having strong emotional bonds with the firm and the firm's purpose, as well as with its management team. As some respondents explained:

- *I believe there has to be devotion and commitment. Middle-level employees have to derive love from what they do; they have to believe in what they do and follow this strategy and this new direction. If they don't believe it themselves, they won't convey it to the others.*
- *It is extremely important to have people that are united and believe in their firm and in its people. It is definitely a precondition to this strategy. You need spontaneous commitment, not enforcement and punishment. Commitment demands believing in something. If you don't believe in something, the chances to do it efficiently are limited.*
- *You must love the product of your firm. You must love what it produces; what you work for. You must be committed to the organization in general; you must be emotionally attached and passionate about the firm, its purpose, and its products.*

On the basis of the abovementioned, we formulate the following proposition:

Research Proposition 8. *Middle-level employees' organizational commitment is positively related to market-driving strategy.*

From this eighth proposition, given that reactive market orientation and organizational commitment are closely related (Siguaw, Brown, & Widing, 1994), it appears for the first time in the literature that organizational commitment has equal importance for the market-driving facet of market orientation. Therefore, the overall essence of this proposition is that employees' senses of commitment, pride, worthwhile contribution, and belonging can be drivers of superior performance and dominance over competitors.

Intrapreneurship was another characteristic that gained striking support from many respondents. Several interviewees indicated the

importance of having employees who engage in entrepreneurial behaviors within the context of the existing firm and who operate as if the firm belonged to them, thus obtaining ownership of their activities. Some insightful quotes here were as follows:

- *This trait is extremely important in order to have employees that can make a difference. The employee who acts as an entrepreneur within the firm is probably the one who will generate the extra idea, will open a new road, a new direction, or will be more willing to follow the idea that leads to a market-driving strategy.*
- *If an employee can break the “chains” that separate the manager from the entrepreneur and think as if he/she was the owner, this will facilitate the market-driving strategy. This trait governs the culture of our firm; to be a small entrepreneur in your own field; this unifies all the other functions, increases your commitment, and gives you ownership of the firm's purpose.*

Based on the foregoing, we formulate the following proposition:

Research Proposition 9. *Middle-level employees' intrapreneurship is positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This ninth proposition exemplifies the driving force of middle-level employees in developing new ventures within an existing organization as well as in exploiting new opportunities. While it is known that intrapreneurship helps managers to renew and revitalize their businesses, to innovate, and to enhance overall business performance (Parker, 2011), this is the first study to identify intrapreneurship's importance at the level of the individual employee, within a market-driving context. This means that individual intrapreneurship will trigger organizational intrapreneurship and enhance the entrepreneurial market-driving culture. This proposition is also the very first to confirm and expand the works of Schindehutte et al. (2008), Zortea-Johnston et al. (2012), and Chen et al. (2012).

Middle managers' flexibility was the last noteworthy theme raised by respondents. Flexibility was regarded as an important trait that enables middle-level employees to adjust to frequently unidentified, complex, and volatile working conditions. For instance, some of the interviewees underlined:

- *Employees working in a market-driving firm work with differentiated business models and with circumstances they probably face for the first time. Many things in market-driving firms are constantly new (e.g., new products, new communications, new channels); therefore, flexibility is definitely needed.*
- *A strategy that changes the market also changes the employees; therefore, employees must be flexible and have to be ready to receive the needed change. If employees are not flexible, they comprise a brake and a “weight” in the firm's effort to move fast and to drive its market.*

Therefore, our final research proposition is:

Research Proposition 10. *Middle-level employees' flexibility is positively related to market-driving strategy.*

This tenth and final proposition empirically verifies for the first time the conceptual suggestion put forth by Johnson et al. (2003) pertaining to the interrelations of flexibility with the market-driving concept. It is extremely interesting that middle-level employees' flexibility is considered more important as a skill compared to that of adaptability, a point not clarified in the literature so far. Flexibility is the ability to respond successfully to usually short-term challenges, activities, and circumstances, while adaptability is a broader concept referring to the ways that organizations and workers mutually adjust to each other's changing needs to benefit both the individuals and the institution (Myers, Gailliard, & Putnam, 2013). This means that in market drivers the most important emphasis is on short-term, day-to-day challenges rather than on long-term undertakings.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1. Theoretical implications

Given the importance of market-driving strategy in the contemporary competitive arena, the primary aim of our study was to investigate one of this strategy's most important determinants—namely, personnel attributes. Therefore, we focused on top management's and middle-level employees' role in formulating such a strategy by identifying their most impactful characteristics. By synthesizing findings from all sections, certain intriguing implications for the academic world are developed. In particular, our results support the assertion that, on the one hand, top and middle managers have some prominent overlapping characteristics in common, while on the other hand, their roles have some traits that vary in significance.

First, it appears that concepts such as open-minded policy, transformational leadership, and creativity are of “universal” importance for market drivers, spanning across organizational levels. Being open-minded and listening to the voices of subordinates, inspiring subordinates, demonstrating charisma, and encouraging creative and original behaviors are dimensions that act as cornerstones for market-driving firms, independent of the organizational level. These findings are consistent with the theoretical works of Kumar et al. (2000) and Carrillat et al. (2004), who were the first to conceptually point out the importance of creativity and transformational leadership for the market-driving approach. Nevertheless, not only have these suggestions never been tested, this is the first time that they have been empirically confirmed.

In light of these commonalities, however, certain traits appear to have varying importance for top versus middle-level, which points to the different roles managers have to play. First, top managers are mainly responsible for forming, supporting, and transferring a strong corporate vision that will guide the market-driving firm throughout its strategic effort. Second, they have to properly manage human resources and ensure that all employees are supported, satisfied, and aligned with the firm's strategy. Third, top managers have to demonstrate skills of prediction and to be highly insightful; they have to use their experience to weigh up all strategic choices and predict possible outcomes in order to take advantage of opportunities and avoid pitfalls.

With regard to middle-level employees, first, they have to be experts in their field. Their superior knowledge and specialized experience is essential in order to drive the firm's overall performance. In addition, they have to engage in intrapreneurial activities, as if they were the firm owners, and operate with proactiveness, openness to risk, and innovativeness. This finding extends the work of Zortea-Johnston et al. (2012), as well as that of Chen et al. (2012), who linked market-driving strategy with entrepreneurship. However, this is the first time that intrapreneurship is narrowed down in terms of its importance at the individual level. In addition, being committed to their organization, to the firm's purpose, and to the firm's people is of central importance for middle-level employees, since in such cases they will be more motivated toward and supportive of the market-driving idea. Furthermore, flexibility is a crucial trait that can assist middle managers to meet the challenges of competing in highly turbulent environments in which market drivers usually operate. Flexibility is a prerequisite for effectively adjusting to new business models, new ventures, and revolutionary ways of addressing the market. This finding is aligned with the theoretical work of Johnson et al. (2003), who conceptually linked market-driving strategy with strategic flexibility. Nonetheless, it is here empirically confirmed for the first time. Finally, given the importance of the abovementioned concepts for market-driven firms, this study contributes to the literature by providing for the first time evidence affirming the theoretical notion of Neuenburg (2010) that market-driven and market-driving strategies have at least a subset of antecedents in common.

6.2. Managerial implications

Our findings carry important managerial implications. In particular, managers must be aware that sometimes it is not enough to simply react to market conditions. On the contrary, leading the market to new avenues can be key to obtaining a paramount competitive position.

Toward this end, managers who wish to drive their industries are strongly advised to develop an open-minded policy and way of thinking; to articulate, endorse, and convey a strong corporate vision; to strategically manage the firm's human resources; to demonstrate charismatic transformational leadership skills; to be able to make predictions and to be insightful; and to foster the development of creative behaviors throughout the organization. Moreover, it is imperative for managers to hire, train, retain, and reinforce middle-level employees who are experts in their specialization, who implement open-minded policies in their everyday routines, and who behave as transformational leaders by inspiring their subordinates. Finally, managers are advised to provide the necessary space in order to develop not merely good, but also committed employees; as well as cultivate latent entrepreneurs within the organization who engage in creative and flexible behaviors.

6.3. Limitations and future research directions

As with all research, this study is subject to certain boundary conditions and limitations. First, this study is exploratory in nature and should be interpreted as such; thus, its results should be applied to other contexts with caution. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study and the sampling method set certain limits regarding the generalizability of the findings.

Given its limitations, this study aspires to open new avenues for future research. More specifically, future research could explore the role of additional top management and middle-level employee characteristics, such as personnel skills [e.g., experimentation, speed of action, talent, problem solving, attitudes, as well as employee knowledge (Lado & Wilson, 1994)]. Moreover, a replication of this study in different countries with various economic growth rates and cultural characteristics and/or with a different research design (e.g., quantitative or mixed) could provide some very valuable insights. Furthermore, investigating the role of other potential antecedent dimensions of market-driving strategy (e.g., organizational capabilities, organizational structure, organizational culture, and organizational systems and processes), as well as relevant moderators, could produce interesting findings. Delving further into the concept of market-driving strategy development, either by comparing its dynamics between flexible startups and large-sized powerful organizations, or by observing it over time through longitudinal data, represents interesting avenues for future research. Moreover, some other intriguing research questions are the exact methods that firms use in order to shift from market-driving to market-driven strategies (and vice versa) and whether firms can successfully implement a combination of these two strategies. Finally, conceptually contrasting market-driving strategy with existing strategies and related concepts (e.g., blue ocean strategy, disruptive innovation, strategic innovation, and business model innovation) and setting unambiguous boundaries to these comparisons could contribute significantly to the scientific understanding of this domain.

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